

1999

# Cycle Starters: American Indian Doctorates as Role Models

Timothy Lintner

University of South Carolina - Aiken, TLintner@usca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/aiken\\_education\\_facpub](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/aiken_education_facpub)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

## Publication Info

Published in *Tribal College*, Volume 10, Issue 3, 1999, pages 46-49.

Lintner, T. (1999). Cycle starters: American Indian doctorates as role models. *Tribal College*, 10(3), 46-49.

© 1999, Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education

<http://www.tribalcollegejournal.org/>

This Article is brought to you by the School of Education at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

# cycle starters:

## American Indian doctorates as role models

REFEREED RESEARCH

By Timothy Lintner

This research on American Indian doctorates began with a look at the various ways for increasing the educational access and retention of American Indian students in higher education. Several approaches are being tried: relevant course offerings, heightened cognizance of disparate learning/teaching styles, creation of American Indian studies centers, and increases in scholarship or assistance funding. Another way to attract and retain American Indian students is through the presence of American Indian faculty. American Indian faculty serve as academic mentors and personal confidants for American Indian students moving through the higher education pipeline. Amongst the American Indian faculty, a small but influential cadre have doctorates. They are perceived, and perceive themselves, as an often overlooked and underrepresented component of American Indian academic success – role models.

The call for academic role models in the American Indian community is not new nor is it exclusive to higher education. McDonald (1978) decries the absence of American Indian academic role models as evidenced through the lack of student aspirations at the primary grade level. He contends that there are too few “Indians in positions such as doctors, lawyers . . . and college professors” for grade school students to model (p.79). This sentiment is seconded by Teba (1990) who claims that “the lack of role models in Native American communities and in the classroom and in visible positions of leadership negatively influences youth to pursue education and professional careers” (p.6). With particular reference to higher education, Wright (1991) contends that “the number and percentage of Indian faculty and professional staff is

almost negligible” (p.8). Adding to this, Luna (1995) states that “Indian students at the undergraduate level see few Indian graduate students and probably even fewer teachers” (p.1). Clearly, within the field of education, there are not enough American Indians in positions of influence to be emulated. Simply stated, throughout the educational pipeline, there are too few American Indian academic role models.

Yet Tijerna and Biemer (1987-88) contend that those American Indians who come to the college campus and receive their degrees have a tremendous “ripple effect in the Indian community. Not only are they role models, but they have a cultural need to give back to the community in time and money” (p.91). Thus, an American Indian academic role model can be defined not merely through degree attainment but by personal involvement and communal responsibility. As we shall see, notions of contribution and service define American Indian doctorates’ status as role models.

### Methodology

To explore the relationship between receiving doctorates and becoming role models, 16 American Indian doctorates in the field of education were interviewed from Northern Arizona University, Arizona State University, the University of Arizona, and the University of Oklahoma. The 10 females and 6 males interviewed represented 13 different tribes or nations. There was an equal distribution of doctorates of education (Ed.D.—8) and doctorates of philosophy (Ph.D.—8) degrees. There were seven different subject fields represented, with the most doctorates in the

field of educational leadership.

Interviews were performed either in person or via the telephone using a series of specific questions about role modeling as well as about their degree and field of study, personal discrimination, educational influences, and the personal and/or communal value of the doctorate degree. The questions shed light on the perceptions and motivations of American Indian doctorate recipients, but this study purposefully limited its scope to the issue of role modeling. The objective of this research was not to accentuate the obvious – that there are too few American Indian academic role models in higher education – but to give those American Indian doctorates the opportunity to define their own role model status.

## The interviews

In discussing his perceived position as an American Indian academic role model, a college professor stated: *“By virtue of my visibility and the way I carry myself and the success that I’ve enjoyed in life, sure, I’m a role model. Others view me as someone that might be able to talk to their youth. So I carry that role out as being a guest speaker. I’m always invited to guest speak at various events. I also see my role as a Native American scholar. I can assist other Native Americans to ascribe to publish, to do research that is meaningful to the Indian community. I can educate the broader society about Indian issues. By my very actions, my very presence, I’m a role model. I accept that responsibility and carry it out to the best of my ability.”*

Mentoring or assisting other American Indians was an integral component of being a role model. When asked about his status as a role model, a male respondent commented: *“I think I am. Particularly for those American Indian students in a doctorate program. I’m a role model by interacting. Many have come to know me personally and know my background and, in many ways, it’s similar to their own. A lot of the issues that they are going through in their doctorate programs, I’ve been through. In this regard, I can help them.”*

A female college professor also believed that her role model status was witnessed through her personal and academic mentoring: *“I think that anybody who has been able to achieve anything that has that high of a standard (as the doctorate) must be a role model. Like my being a professor here. I work with a lot of students, being a mentor. I feel that that’s part of the job of obtaining the doctorate degree. That you are there to share and help others. That you are an example to other Native peoples and to others in education.”*

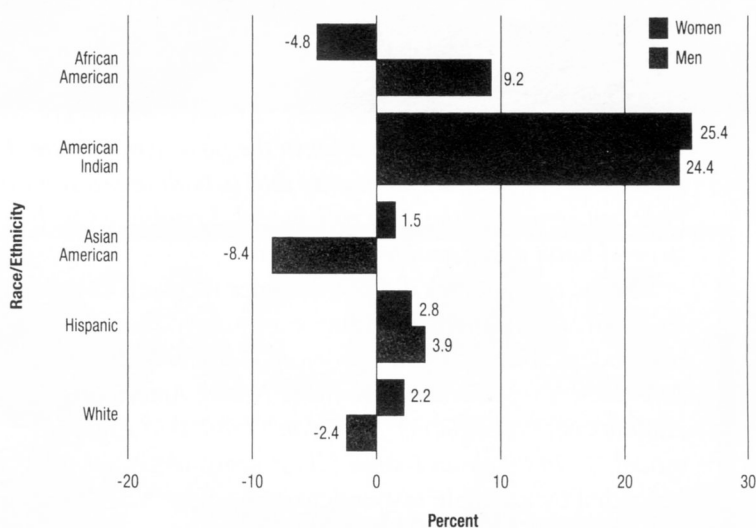
From a more community-based perspective, a male superintendent said, *“I think a lot of people consider me a role model. Maybe because I’m the first of their own to be*

*made superintendent. But I identify with these people. I speak their language. I have the same activities as they do. They see me every day.”*

A female respondent living on a reservation concluded, *“In my home community I think that I am (a role model). I think just by being an example, just by being around and letting young people know that they can do it.”*

One respondent commented that being a role model has also served to alter traditionally held perspectives concerning American Indians. With being a role model comes visibility, and with this visibility comes access and influence. A female college president stated that: *“People wanted me to be a role model. They expect that from me. And I have used my influence when I do public speaking. I know that people have a very traditional perspective when they think of Indians. I have worked really hard for people to get to know me as an Indian. If they know this, it changes their perspective about Indian people. It’s more about what*

Changes in Doctoral Degrees, by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender: 1995 to 1996



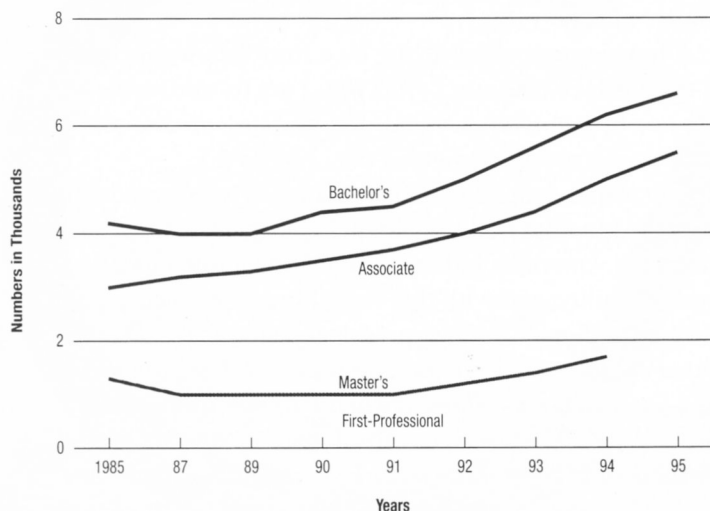
Source: National Research Council, Doctorate Records File, 1995 to 1996.

*There was a 46.3 percent increase in the number of education doctorates earned by American Indians in 1996 compared with 1995. There was a larger increase in overall doctoral degrees awarded to American Indians than any other group of people, according to the American Council on Education’s 16th Annual Minorities in Higher Education Report.*

*your spirit is, what your soul is, how you look at your family and community, than if you wear moccasins or not.”*

Though one respondent felt “extremely uncomfortable with the label of role model,” he approached the topic from a traditional, selfless perspective: *“Am I a role model? I don’t think so. Others may say so, but I really don’t believe in it. At least from a traditional way of viewing things. It’s not what you do or how many letters you have behind your name that defines you. It’s who you are and what you do*

Degrees Awarded to American Indians, by Type of Degree: 1985 to 1995



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics*. Washington, DC: 1997.

Between 1985 and 1995, American Indians achieved substantial growth in all four degree categories, including a 29.1 percent increase in the number of master's degrees awarded. Chart from the American Council on Education's 16th Annual Minorities in Higher Education Report

*with your life. I participate a lot in the pow wow culture. I do a lot of stuff in the community that is both important and time consuming. If that is a role model, I couldn't say. I depend upon other people to say that."*

Some respondents did not consider themselves role models for the American Indian community. One respondent stated, *"I don't promote that I'm Native American. I try to encourage those Native American students here on campus, but I don't think that I'm a role model . . . in being an Indian."* This sentiment was seconded by a female respondent who said: *"No. I'm not a role model for either the Native community as a whole nor Native women in particular. I'm interested, but I would not call myself an advocate. A lot of people don't know that I'm Native American because I don't make that big a deal out of it. I don't go out and wear a big sign that says 'Native American Woman.' Students don't come to me because I'm Native American. I want them to come to me because of what I can do for them, not based on my cultural background."*

Though a few respondents were hesitant to view themselves as role models, the majority of those interviewed both embraced the opportunity and accepted its inherent obligations. One respondent stated, *"I welcome the opportunity to be a role model. If I can help just one student or alter one stereotype or false perception, then I'm doing my job."*

Referring particularly to the field of education, one respondent stated: *"I think it's important for other Native*

*people to see some of their own in the field of education. We who work in education are the cycle starters. It's a legacy really. People seek us for insight and assistance. And for those who may benefit from this assistance, they now have the unspoken obligation of passing it on, of giving it to others. People also look at us as achievers, as doers. 'If he or she can get a doctorate, then maybe I can too.' It starts with those of us who are on top of the proverbial academic ladder. I think that we as Indian doctorates have an obligation to start the cycle of access and success: that we provide information that can hopefully start and perpetuate a continuing dialogue. And my greatest hope is that other Indians will look at the doctorate, or any other type of educational goal, as something that is attainable. But we must start this cycle of success."*

## Discussion

What emerges from these interviews is a clear sense of both opportunity and obligation. With the acquisition of the doctorate comes a unique and powerful means by which to contribute to the American Indian community in general and the educational community in particular. For American Indians, a steadfast tenet inherent in attaining degrees, at all levels of the academic pipeline, is the belief in giving back.

Many American Indian doctorates viewed their role model status from an academic perspective, primarily mentoring other American Indian students. Indeed, mentoring was seen as the most immediate means by which to facilitate an increased American Indian presence in the educational arena. One respondent felt that being a role model challenges the ageless stereotypes of reduction and restriction that surround American Indian education. Some defined their role model status through their physical presence in their communities, the cultural beliefs they share, and their educational encouragement. And even though a few respondents did not perceive themselves as American Indian role models per se, they still adhered to the importance of assistance and service.

Most insightful is the notion of starting cycles. Many respondents felt that it was their responsibility to facilitate an increase in American Indian educators. Their goal was creating an academic, communal, and personal environment in which other American Indians could pursue and attain their educational objectives. Inherent here is the obligation to "pass on" such an environment to those American Indians moving up the educational ladder. Cycle starting is no more than educational legacy building; you do for others that which others did for you.

## Conclusion

In looking for ways to increase the American Indian presence in higher education, it may be time to tap a resource that, heretofore, has been underutilized. Through



their mentoring and direct community involvement, American Indian doctorates can and do serve as role models. They open lines of constructive communication, challenge traditionally held stereotypes that compartmentalize American Indian education, and contribute on campus or in their home communities. By serving as role models, American Indian doctorates are also creating an academic ripple effect – increased access and retention of American Indian students – at both the undergraduate and graduate levels of study. They are opening the collegiate doors so other American Indians can pass through. They are starting the cycle.

(Editor's note: Research submitted for this department of the Tribal College Journal is refereed by the Research Review Panel. Scholars are invited to contact the editor about how to submit their work.)

Timothy Lintner received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Northern Arizona University and his doctorate from the University of California, Los Angeles. His current research focuses on issues of acquisition and utility of English on the Navajo Reservation.

## References

Luna, G. (1995). Mentoring university Navajo pre-service education students. *Journal of Navajo Education*, 12, 8-13.

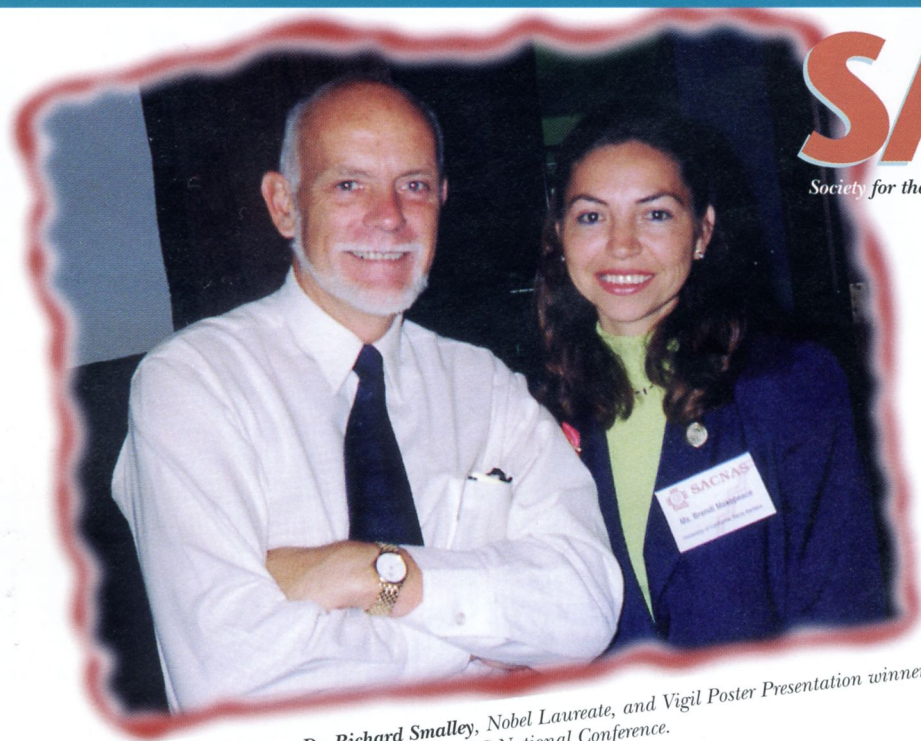
McDonald, A. (1978). Why do Indian students drop out of college? In Thompson, T. (Ed.). *The schooling of American Indians*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Education.

Teba, B. (1990). Testimony presented to the Indian national at-risk task force. Unpublished raw data.

Tijerna, K., & Biemer, P. (1987-88). The dance of Indian higher education: One step forward, and two steps back. *Educational Record*, 68, 87-91.

Wilds, D. J. & Wilson, R. (1998). *Minorities in Higher Education*. Sixteenth Annual Status Report. Washington, DC.: American Council on Education.

Wright, B. (1991). American Indian and Alaskan Native higher education: Toward a new century of academic achievement and cultural integrity. (ERIC document Reproduction Service No. 343 771).



SACNAS members **Dr. Richard Smalley**, Nobel Laureate, and Vigil Poster Presentation winner **Brendi Makepeace** at the 1997 SACNAS National Conference.

# SACNAS

Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science

## Join us on the Cutting Edge of Science Education!

### OUR MEMBERSHIP...

...includes science professors, industry scientists, K-12 teachers, and students.

### OUR MISSION...

...is to assist Chicano/Latino and Native American students in pursuing the advanced degrees necessary for research careers and science teaching professions at all levels.

P.O. Box 8526, Santa Cruz, CA 95061-8526 • Tel: 408.459.0170 • Fax: 408.459.0194 • Email: info@sacnas.org

To learn more about SACNAS, please visit our website at: **www.sacnas.org**